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Briefing – Food in Schools

Purpose

This note has been prepared by Treasury and provides Ministers with a brief overview on the Children's Commissioner's Experts Advisory Group (EAG) on Solutions to Child Poverty's recommendation for a food in schools programme as well as providing some high level options for how work in this area could be progressed. The Ministries of Education, Social Development and Health have been consulted.

Proposal

The EAG proposes that "the government design and implement a collaborative food-in-schools programme commencing with decile 1 to 4 primary and intermediate schools".

Comment

The EAG suggest that children born into poor families are more likely to have lower educational achievement, and are more likely to go to school hungry. In light of the Government's focus on student achievement, the EAG identifies what they see as a gap in current education policy - mitigating the impact of hunger on children's ability to take advantage of the opportunities that education offers.

We have identified two immediate problems that a food in schools policy might be expected to address:

- improving educational outcomes, by removing hunger as a barrier to learning, and
- alleviating hardship and suffering for children who arrive at school hungry

The ability of a policy to put food into schools to achieve the second possible objective will depend in part on the reason for the lack of food – for instance whether it is due to:

- low parental income, or means
- parents who are time poor, disorganised or are not meeting their responsibilities
- children who refuse or choose not to eat breakfast
- different cultural norms around nutrition

Different responses may be more effective than food in schools in addressing some of these causes – for instance budgeting advice, additional income transfers, parenting support, parental education programmes.

Evaluations of school food programmes do not indicate that food in schools programmes are necessarily effective at achieving their intended outcomes. For example, a 2012 Auckland University study found a New Zealand breakfast programme had no statistically significant effect on attendance and no effect on academic achievement or student conduct¹. These findings on academic achievement and student conduct are consistent with the findings of well-designed international studies on school breakfasts in first world countries². Internationally the majority of studies found that even where breakfast was offered at school, there was no increase in the probability of a child actually eating breakfast³.

¹ Ni Mhurchu C, Turley M, Gorton D, Jiang Y, Michie J, Maddison R, Hattie J. Effects of a free school breakfast programme on school attendance, achievement, psychosocial function, and nutrition: study protocol for a stepped wedge cluster randomised trial. *BMC Public Health* 2010;10(1):738

² Crampton, E. "School Breakfast Programmes and Beyond", presentation to SSPA, 14 February 2012.

³ Ibid – see Bhattacharya, J, J Currie and S Haider (2006); Gleason, P (1995); Devaney, B and T Fraker (1989) for example.

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There are two questions that arise in relation to the EAG's proposal – what is the nature and scale of the problem, and is there a role for government in this space and, if so, what is it?

Nature and scale of the problem

Treasury completed initial analysis in October 2012 of the limited available data around food security and meal consumption (see T2012/2501 for further detail). We have chosen to focus on the hardest end of the problem – those who never or rarely have breakfast. We note the following:

- 3% of primary school children never had breakfast, with a further 9% having breakfast only on most days. Analysis of the reason why children were not eating breakfast suggests that much of the problem was children not wanting to eat breakfast, rather than food being unavailable⁴. Not eating breakfast was particularly prevalent amongst Pasifika children (around 12% never ate breakfast).
- Compared with the 6% of all children (including teenagers) who never had breakfast, missing breakfast was more common in households with the highest levels of deprivation (11% missed breakfast), with income below \$20,000 per annum (10%), in larger and extended families (8% and 13% respectively), and those identifying as Māori (8%) or Pasifika (12%). Note these statistics include children of all ages, rather than only primary school children.
- Between 3% and 6% of households often experienced food insecurity. A larger group will experience it sometimes, but the available statistics do not discriminate between those who lack money and other reasons, such as disorganisation or lack of time. Those in high deprivation areas, who are Māori or are a larger family (with more than five children) were more likely to suffer from food insecurity.

Looking at the evidence we have, we agree that children from low income families are less likely to consume breakfast (although the rates are still low overall) and are more likely to experience food insecurity. This does not provide information about the drivers of the problem, however. For example, if children are choosing not to eat breakfast then providing it at school will not solve the problem, as the international evidence cited on the previous page suggests. If there is a cultural barrier which means some families tend not to eat breakfast, then education or some other intervention may be more effective options.

The Ministry of Social Development does not agree with aspects of the treatment of the evidence presented, but agrees with the options presented.

We note that the EAG's suggestion to focus a programme only towards low decile schools will not fully address the problem. For example, while the 30% of schools that are decile 1-3 have a higher proportion of children from lower socio-economic families, more children from low income families actually attend the 70% of schools that are decile 4-10. There may also be value in looking at provision in ECE centres given the impact of nutrition in the early years on child cognitive development.

The lack of good New Zealand-specific data suggests that better understanding the nature and scale of the problem would be beneficial in deciding on a policy solution. The data used by both Treasury and the EAG is from 2007 and does not include the effects of the economic downturn, i.e. the problem may actually be larger than 2007 evidence suggests. Commissioning an update of the research would help to identify the scale and nature of the problem.

⁴ Health Sponsorship Council (2007). 'Children's Food and Drink Survey'. This survey found that for a significant percentage of those children who never ate breakfast, their parents did not think they could get their children to eat breakfast.

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Is there a role for government in providing food in schools?

Governments in a number of developed economies provide food in schools. However there has been pressure to increase the number of schools participating in these programmes, to widen who qualifies for the programmes, and to improve the range and quality of food available. This has significantly increased the costs to between 10% and 25% of the cost of providing education. Given this evidence, we note that scope creep is a risk if the government did become involved in delivering food in schools itself.

Also, there are a range food provision programmes already in New Zealand schools:

Provider	Programme
Government	Fruit in Schools – provides a piece of fruit per day to children in low decile schools at a cost of \$6.9 million per annum. Decile funding – provided to schools serving lower socio-economic communities to use at their discretion
KidsCan⁵ (with some public funding)	Food for kids - bread, spreads, fruit pottles, raisins, muesli bars, spaghetti and baked beans are provided to schools. \$386,000 of government funding is provided.
Fonterra	Milk for Schools – free milk each day provided to children. Trialled in Northland and will be rolled out across all primary schools in 2013.
Sanitarium and Fonterra	KickStart Breakfast – free weetbix and milk provided to over 400 schools.

If food in schools was to be provided, we think the following could be used as principles as a starting point for assessing the type of programme to be used:

- Targeted towards those who need it most.
- Minimise negative consequences, including stigmatising those children who participate, and the incentives sent to parents about who should be responsible for feeding their children.
- Could involve some level of government funding but not get the government involved in directly providing food in schools to minimise scope creep.
- Flexibility to allow schools to develop a programme or local partnership which works for them.

Options if the government did want to pursue providing food in schools

The following table outlines a range of options, according to the scale of government involvement, which the government could pursue if it wished to do something in the food in schools space. Note that many of the options are not mutually exclusive – for example, research could be undertaken prior to making a decision on pursuing one of the medium or high options outlined:

Scale of government involvement	Option
Low	Commission research on the nature and scope of the problem to support decisions on an appropriate response. Officials could also meet with existing providers to understand the level of need and the challenges faced.
	Reassess the gaps in food provision in schools in the context of programmes already available once Fonterra's Milk for Schools programme has been rolled out across the whole country.
	Education campaign targeted at Pasifika families in particular.

⁵ KidsCan receives support from Tasti, Tip Top, Conferenz, McConnell Dowell, Retko and Toll as well as government funding.

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	Increase existing funding to KidsCan.
Medium	Support the Children's Commissioner to develop and support all schools in implementing a partnership approach between schools and community/private providers, with some attached government funding. This could be trialled in the State Sector Trials areas.
	Introduce a contestable fund administered by a government agency for NGOs to bid into to provide food in schools. Adequate criteria and screening processes for applications would need to be developed for the fund to be effective.
	Increase decile funding and inform schools of the expectation that some of this would be used to provide food in schools.
High	Redirect existing government funding for food programmes towards a new programme which has been designed in accordance with the principles outlined in this note.
	Introduce a government run and funded food in schools scheme, potentially targeted to children in families which hold a community services card.

The Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC) has already partially worked up an option to support schools (and possibly ECE centres) to implement a partnership approach between schools and community/private providers, with some attached government funding. We suggest this could be trialled in the State Sector Trial areas in the first instance. OCC proposes to develop a set of principles and guidance for all schools including:

- Open access - taking an opt-in approach, with sliding scale funding (higher rates for lower decile schools and vice versa) to ensure good coverage and reduce stigma.
- Best practice - intensity, targeting, nutritional composition (perhaps drawing from the nutritional guidelines for children aged 2-18 recently developed by the Ministry of Health), and treatment of cultural issues.
- Partnership - funding could be dependent on partnering with an NGO/private provider therefore involving the community and encouraging philanthropy.
- Coordination – providing administrative support for schools.

This approach incorporates many of the criteria outlined on page 2, and the partnership and community-led nature of this model is consistent with the rationale behind the current Social Sector Trials. It remains unclear how it would be targeted and how poor incentives for parental responsibility would be minimised. [Withheld under s9(2)(g)(i)]

Any new funding would need to be evaluated against other proposed solutions and other expenditure.

Conclusion

We recommend updating the research to understand the nature and scale of the problem, to enable the most effective policy response to be developed. Officials could also engage with existing providers of food in schools to understand the current level of need and the challenges faced.

If the government did want to do something relatively low cost immediately or do something in addition to updating the research, we suggest either setting an amount the government is prepared to contribute and increasing funding to KidsCan, or creating a contestable fund.

If the government wanted to do something at the more significant end of the spectrum, we would recommend further investigating the OCC's option of a community-led partnership approach to feeding children using schools or other community sites as a venue. As noted, new funding would be needed or existing funding could be reprioritised to provide for food in schools.